



Challenging Homophobic Behaviour

Bullying on the basis of sexuality is a common experience for young people who are same sex attracted or for those who may not behave according to gender stereotypes.

Homophobia at school

Around 10 per cent of our school communities experience feelings of same sex attraction, or identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual. In 2010 only 19 per cent of same sex attracted students reported that their school was supportive of their sexuality.

Homophobic bullying, like any kind of bullying, can include physical violence, name calling, put downs, 'jokes', sexual harassment, threats or damage to property, social exclusion, or online bullying.

Research in Australia found that 61 per cent of same sex attracted young people have experienced verbal abuse and 18 per cent have experienced physical abuse, on the basis of their sexuality. When asked where they were when this took place, 80 per cent said it was at school (Writing Themselves in 3, Hillier et al, 2010).

Why tackle homophobia?

All students have the right to feel valued for who they are and included as part of the school community. According to the Victorian Equal Opportunity Act 1995 it is against the law to discriminate in education or to harass a student at school on the grounds of their actual or assumed sexual orientation, or because of the sexual orientation of their parents, friends, or family.

The impact of homophobia has real consequences on the physical and emotional health and wellbeing of students. Experiences of homophobia can increase the risk of self-harm, suicide, drug and alcohol use. The research also shows that students who experience homophobia are much more likely to miss classes, or drop out of school altogether.

For those witnessing homophobic bullying, or the use of homophobic language, it can be unclear what to do, or how to respond. Where there is a culture of ignoring homophobia, the whole school community - staff, students, and families can experience negative outcomes.

What should be done?

1. Challenge homophobic language and behaviour

Most students and staff in Victorian schools will frequently hear homophobic remarks, including use of the word 'gay' in a negative or derogatory way e.g. 'homework is so gay'.

Sometimes this language is perceived as harmless, because it is not being used in a direct way to attack a particular student. Use of the word 'gay' as a synonym for stupid or rubbish can be ignored because it is not seen as intentionally homophobic. Although students may not be

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meaning to be homophobic, for students or staff who are same sex attracted, this language can have a negative impact, and be experienced as homophobic.

Challenging this language is essential to creating a school environment where everyone can be themselves and feel safe and supportive.

How do you challenge this language?

As a parent or teacher, you will have your own strategies for dealing with unacceptable language, derogatory comments, or put-downs. Make sure that homophobic behaviour and/or language is one of the things you consistently address. This could include discussions with students and consequences for their actions. Once students realise why this behaviour is not tolerated, you will find it much easier to deal with.

2. Create a more inclusive school culture

Raise awareness

Ensure that the whole school community understands what homophobic bullying is, and how the school plans to prevent it. Remind students that sexuality is not visible and that their homophobic remarks may be offensive to others whether or not they are aware of it.

Have discussions with students about the derogatory use of the word gay and the impact this has on those who are gay. Talk positively about sexual diversity.

Take notice

Encourage those who know about bullying to report it. Use the audit tool from Safe Schools Coalition Victoria (SSCV) to assess the frequency of homophobic incidents, and use of homophobic language in your school. Keep a bullying record that specifies whether discrimination on the basis of sexuality, or other forms of discrimination, were involved.

Avoid assumptions

Challenge the common assumption that everyone is heterosexual. Try not to assume that you know anyone's sexuality on the basis of how they look or behave. Avoid asking questions like 'do you have a boyfriend?' to girls, and 'do you have a girlfriend?' to boys. These kind of experiences can make same sex attracted people feel uncomfortable, or not included.

Use curriculum opportunities

There are plenty of chances to include positive discussions of diverse sexuality within learning areas. Sexuality education should always include same sex attraction into discussions about sex and relationships. In other areas, such as English or History, gay and lesbian authors or historical figures or events can be discussed.

Offer support

In order for same sex attracted students to report bullying, they need to feel that something will happen, and they will receive support. Staff training is available from SSCV to ensure that all staff are able to respond appropriately and sensitively to the needs of same sex attracted young people. Remember that not all same sex attracted students will have supportive parents, so you may be the only supportive adult in their life.

If your school is not already a member, join Safe Schools Coalition Victoria! We provide free membership, training, and resources to help combat homophobic bullying, and creative safe and supportive environments for same sex attracted and gender diverse students, staff, and families.

For more informative visit www.sscv.org.au or www.facebook.com/safeschoolsvic.

